

VZCZCXYZ0001
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHTU #0813/01 3090847
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 050847Z NOV 09 ZDK
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6954
INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000813

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/04/2019
TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM TS
SUBJECT: WHAT NEXT AFTER TUNISIA'S ELECTIONS?

REF: A. TUNIS 796
 1B. TUNIS 792
 1C. TUNIS 791 AND PREVIOUS

Classified by Ambassador Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

11. (C) The crushing victory of President Ben Ali and the ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) on October 25 was the carefully engineered result of a non-competitive elections process. Although the GOT has attempted to portray the latest elections as an incremental step toward democracy, the opposite is closer to the truth. More interesting than the election result is the question of what comes next. In the near term, we may see a significant cabinet shuffle. Longer-term succession questions now also begin to loom: President Ben Ali cannot run again without amending the constitution to increase the maximum age from 75 to 78. His son-in-law Sakhr Al-Matri, who many believe is being groomed as an heir, also could not become president in five years unless the constitution was amended to reduce the minimum age to 32. Ben Ali's wife, Leila, who has noticeably raised her own public profile in recent months, is also seen as a potential contender, and would need no constitutional amendment to take office. A cabinet shuffle, and particularly a new foreign minister, could make the USG's working relations with Tunisia marginally easier, but the question of succession could increasingly preoccupy the GOT leadership, at the expense of engagement, in the coming years. End summary.

Non-Competitive Process not a Step in the Right Direction

12. (C) As reported ref B, according to official results, President Ben Ali took a handy 89.6 percent of the vote to win a fifth five year term on October 25, and the ruling RCD took 75 percent of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies. The incumbents' overwhelming victory surprised no one, as it was the product of an obviously non-competitive process. Ben Ali ran against three hand-picked opponents, one of whom was the first cousin of his wife and another a long time loyalist who had already endorsed Ben Ali when he was reportedly asked to run. Leftist Ahed Brahim, the third opponent, was a genuine critic of the Ben Ali government, but with little media exposure, meagre resources, and heavy handed GO restrictions on campaign activities, he stood no chance against the Ben Ali juggernaut.

13. (C) In the legislative elections, three genuinely independent opposition parties competed for seats. The first, the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), withdrew after authorities rejected, without explanation, 14 of their 26 proposed candidate slates. The second, the Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties (FTDL), ran but failed to win a single seat. Of Tunisia's genuine opposition parties, only

Ahmed Brahim's Tajdid (Renewal) Party, will be (nominally) represented in the incoming parliament. Tajdid lost a seat in the October elections, dropping its representation from three seats in the outgoing parliament to two seats in the new one. The Chamber of Deputies, in its coming session, has increased its total membership from 189 to 214 seats, so the Tajdid's proportional drop from three to two seats was even greater in practical terms.

¶4. (C) Government supporters, even those willing to concede that Ben Ali was predestined to win, nonetheless present the elections as a step, however modest, toward democracy: Ben Ali's vote count was marginally more "realistic" at 89 percent (below the 90 percent threshold for the first time) and opposition parties in parliament increased their representation from 19 percent to 25 percent. However, of the 53 opposition seats in the new parliament, only two of 53 opposition seats (three percent) are occupied by parties with a track record of actually opposing the government. The remainder of the seats are occupied by parties that are nominally in the opposition but in practice sing President Ben Ali's praises and vote with the ruling RCD. (Two examples of this phenomenon are the Popular Unity Party, lead by Mrs. Ben Ali's cousin, and the "Green Party for Progress," allegedly created and funded by the Ministry of Interior.) In the previous parliament, three of 36 (eight percent) opposition seats were held by genuine independents. Thus the 2009 elections constituted a tangible step backward on the already very slanted playing field in Tunisia's parliament.

Anticipated Cabinet Shuffle

¶5. (C) President Ben Ali undertook a substantial cabinet shuffle following the elections in 2004, and before that in 1999. Observers expect he will do so again, but not before the ruling party holds its annual conference on November 7. Prime Minister Ghannouchi, who has held his post since 1999, may be a prime candidate for retirement. A respected technocrat, he is thought by some contacts to be tired after a decade on the job. A contact at the Ministry of Development and International Cooperation recently acknowledged to us that planning activities in her office were currently on the back burner, while officials wait to see if the Ministry will have a change of leadership.

¶6. (C) A senior source close to the Presidency recently indicated to the Ambassador that Ben Ali was considering moving Foreign Minister Abdallah out of his slot, which he has held since 2005. Abdallah's arrival in the MFA slot signalled the start of a new era of micromanagement, or stifling, of contacts and interaction between the U.S. Embassy (and other foreign embassies) and Tunisian government entities. This stifling policy has even extended, over time, to active MFA interference and obstruction of Embassy interaction with universities and NGOs, including purely charitable, non-political organizations. In this context, Abdallah's removal, if it transpires, could, but would not necessarily, augur better working relations between the Embassy and the GOT.

The Elephant is Getting Bigger and the Room Smaller

¶7. (C) With the 2009 elections behind us, the question which begins to loom larger is what will happen in 2014. Now 73, President Ben Ali will be 78 in 2014 and would not be able to stand for a sixth term unless he again amends the constitution, as he did in 2002, to revise upward the age limit, now set at 75. Ben Ali retroactively justified his 1987 palace coup against Bourguiba by amending the constitution in 1988 to allow the Prime Minister to replace an ailing head of state. He subsequently amended the constitution to ensure that no Prime Minister of his could use the same maneuver. Thus, a new amendment to allow Ben Ali a sixth five year term is clearly a possibility.

¶ 8. (C) There is no Vice President and constitutionally the next in the line of succession is the Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies. This position is currently filled by septagenarian Ben Ali loyalist Fouad M'bazza, who poses no threat to Ben Ali. M'bazza must stand for reelection when the Chamber reconvenes on November 14. Observers believe Hedi Djilani, a business leader whose daughter is married to the first lady's brother, is the most likely candidate to replace M'bazza, should he go. Djilani, thought to be favored over M'bazza by Mrs. Ben Ali, likewise is seen to pose no political threat to the President.

¶ 9. (C) Outside the constitutional line of succession are two potential successors. Sakhr Al-Matri, Ben Ali's 28 year old son-in-law (significantly also son-in-law to First Lady Leila Ben Ali, the President's second wife) has been steadily consolidating power. He purchased, in 2008, Tunisia's largest publishing house, whose flagship publication is Al-Sabah, the Tunis daily which is Tunisia's closest approximation to a paper of record. Al-Matri is also the proprietor of Al-Zitouna radio, the very popular private station which broadcasts the Qu'ran and other Islamic programming. (Matri described Zitouna to the Ambassador as a necessary counterweight to extremist Islamic broadcasts entering the country via satellite (ref C).)

¶ 10. (C) Most significantly in political terms, Matri appeared for the first time on the RCD's legislative list for the second district of Tunis, displacing Afif Chihboub, an in-law of Ben Ali's daughter by his first marriage. Chihboub's displacement was a major set-back for this branch of the president's family. With the RCD's easy win in Tunis (as across the country) Matri will now take up public office for the first time, a move seen by observers as an obvious stepping stone on the road to power.

¶ 11. (C) Not to be ruled out in the coming succession scenario is the First Lady herself. Leila (Trabelsi) Ben Ali, 54, long thought to be a major "force behind the throne," is increasingly stepping into the public spotlight herself. During the presidential campaign, the first lady was the headliner at numerous rallies and publicity events. Her photograph has been appearing in greater frequency on the front pages of Tunisia's dailies, visiting centers for senior citizens and the handicapped.

¶ 12. (C) In a recent interview given to a pan Arab daily, reminiscent of remarks sometimes made by western female politicians, Trabelsi stressed her role as working mother, constantly seeking balance between work and family. Mohammed Bouabdelli (strictly protect), a former school master who penned an anti-Ben Ali expose recently published in France told the Ambassador November 2 he was convinced Trabelsi had already taken de facto control of the presidential palace and was even manipulating the dosage of Ben Ali's medication to keep him under control. (Comment: We do not give special credence to this assertion, but it is indicative of the sort of speculation which occurs constantly in Tunisia's cafe society. While we have no reliable public opinion research to point to, anecdotal evidence suggests Leila Ben Ali may be the most hated person in Tunisia. End comment.)

Comment: Murky Outlook for U.S. Interests and Influence

¶ 13. (C) A potential cabinet shuffle in the coming weeks, particularly if some key posts are filled by younger, dynamic figures, could reenergize, at least in the short term, the rather stagnant policy atmosphere that prevails in Tunis. Should it come about, a change in MFA leadership, in particular, would offer at least the prospect of greater working level interaction and exchanges between the USG, GOT entities, and civil society.

¶ 14. (C) Panning back to the broader picture, however, the Ben

Ali government has in recent years been growing more inward looking and has often seemed to emphasize containment over cooperation in its dealings with the U.S., even in areas that would not strike us as politically sensitive. This reluctance to engage substantively, and to limit and restrict our dealings not only with the government, but also with non-governmental Tunisian institutions and youth, certainly reflects the ruling elite's general insecurity and fear of hidden agendas, or perhaps unintended consequences, of cooperative programming with the U.S. As we look ahead to the coming years in this post-election period, it is likely that Tunisian reticence (offset by occasional openings and targets of opportunity) will continue, at least until there is greater clarity on the question of succession. End comment.

GRAY